

A Walk Around Fishergate's History

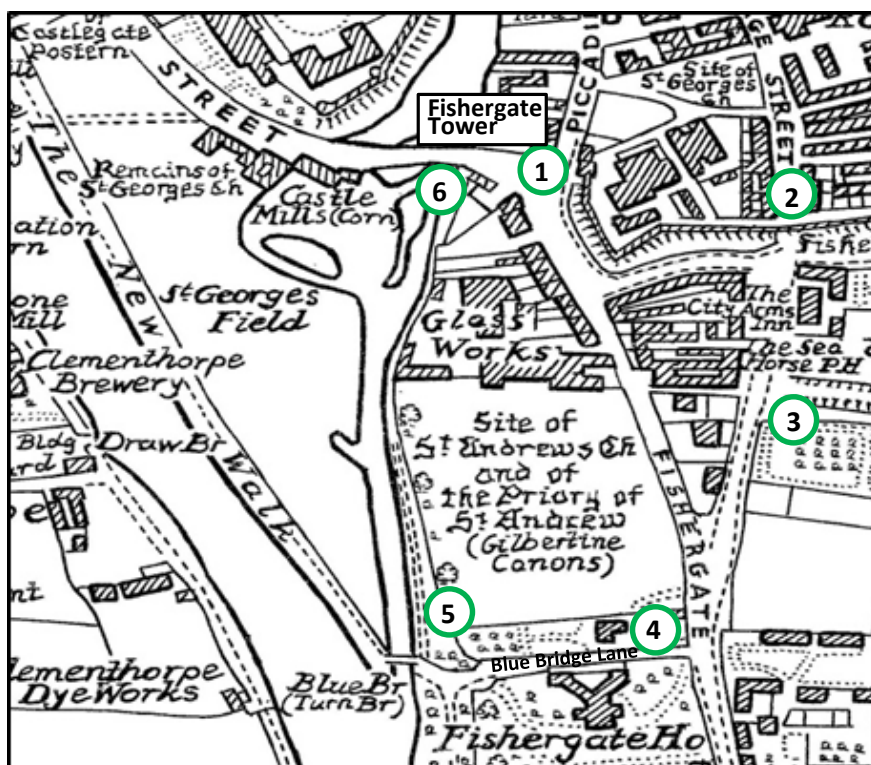
Fishergate is often overlooked by visitors heading for the city centre, but archaeological discoveries have revealed a fascinating history.

Fawcett Street and Fulford Road follow a Roman Road and Roman burials have been found nearby.

A craft manufacturing and trading community lived here long before the Norman Conquest, the river Foss provided fishing and a safe harbour, and food for the city was grown on adjacent fields.

Three medieval churches and a priory were demolished in the 16th century and the community dispersed, leaving open fields, market gardens, orchards and windmills.

The Fishergate we see today began with canalisation of the River Foss bringing new industry to the city in the 19th century.



Start at Fishergate Tower and follow the walk using the numbers marked on this 1849 map

1. Fishergate Postern Gate & Tower

In 1068, William the Conqueror cleared a large area of the old city to build a Mott & Bailey castle. He also dammed the river Foss to fill the castle moat and a marshy defensive lake.

A deep ditch, earth ramparts and timber palisade were built around Walmgate some 100 years later, with the present masonry walls erected in 1345, probably including a small stone tower at Fishergate Postern. The present Tower was built in 1505.

Initially the tower had a flat lead roof, with a small look-out turret projecting above the battlements. The tiled roof was added by 1610 and it is shown on John Speed's map.

A Watchman lived in the Tower and controlled entry into the city, collecting taxes from traders and locking the Postern Gate overnight. Living quarters were quite reasonable for the period, with fireplaces on two floors, mezzanine floors for sleeping and storage, and a garderobe (*lavatory and wardrobe*) discharging into the river.

There is no evidence the Tower was ever attacked, although there was fighting nearby during the 1644 Siege of York.

The last time the walls were prepared for defence was during the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, after which they were gradually re-born as a tourist attraction. Later, the Tower was leased out by the council, including a bricklayer, William Swann, whose son, Thomas was born there on 28th August 1845.

2. City Walls to Fishergate Bar

A new and larger bridge was built when the river Foss was canalised in 1794, beginning the development of modern Fishergate. Some buildings along Fishergate date from the early 19th century and still have Georgian features.

The original Mason's Arms was rebuilt in 1935, with a fireplace and oak panelling from the Gate-House of Clifford's Tower. It has recently lost its stained glass Masonic sign, but still displays heraldry and other imagery. Oxtoby's was founded in 1889 and imaginatively advertised their skill and business, but is now a shop and flats.

The Corner Tower of the walls has a small room with arrow slits under the crenelated walkway roof. Opposite, Festival Flats were built in 1951, at the start of York's award-winning post-war housing improvements.

Fishergate Bar is on the Roman road to Selby and was built in 1345, along with the adjoining masonry walls. Now much reduced in size, it is thought to have had a 2 storey building above the arch and square defensive towers.

The Bar was blocked in 1489, after the Earl of Northumberland was killed in the "Yorkshire Rebellion" against Henry VII's new taxes. The revolt was only 4 years after the defeat of Richard III and it shows Henry VII's unpopularity in York. The King sent the Earl of Surrey to regain control and the rebel leaders were hanged.

You can still see where the stones were scorched pink when the wooden gates were burnt.

3. Pubs, Cattle Market & All Saints Church

Fishergate Bar was re-opened in 1827, when the cattle market was moved out of the city to the area around the Barbican Centre. Animal pens also lined the ramparts along Paragon Street

The influx of farmers, drovers and buyers led to a great many pubs and inns being built in the area, some with extensive stabling and overnight accommodation. The Phoenix Inn retains many original features, but the former Cattle Market Inn is now Toto's and the City Arms has been converted into flats. The Seahorse Inn has a wonderful sign and once had stables for 50 horses.

Behind the Woolpack Inn was a butcher's shop, and for many years the wood-carver, Dick Reid, had his workshop in the lane. The coat of arms now hanging on the Merchant Adventurers Hall was made here.

On the corner of Kent Street, an archaeological excavation in 2007/8 found the remains of All Saints Church, one of the 3 'lost' Fishergate churches. Founded before the Norman Conquest, All Saints Church was given to Whitby Abbey on condition that monks should live there and pray for the souls of William II and his successors.

All Saints was closed in the dissolution of the monasteries and in 1586 the Parish was added to St Lawrence.

A large number of graves were found here when the land was cleared for the cattle market, suggesting a sizeable population lived in the area during medieval times. Archaeologists also found the remains of over 100 soldiers who died of disease during the 1644 Siege of York.

A skeleton of a woman was found in the apse of the church. She is thought to have been an anchoress who lived there for 20 years in deep religious seclusion and died in 1448.

4. Fishergate School, Roman Cemetery and St Helen's Church & Hospital

Fishergate School was opened in 1895 and is the first of Walter Brierley's magnificent York schools. All have large windows and high classrooms opening off a large central hall. In 1910 there were 581 seniors, 123 juniors and 280 infants. Today, this very happy primary school has some 230 children.

Roman graves and cremation burial urns were found when building the school and Tower House (*the large former War Office building nearby*) including this funerary statue of a lady with a 3rd century hair style. (*she can be seen in the Yorkshire Museum*)

Roman cremations were also found in the grounds of Fishergate House in Blue Bridge Lane, where St Helen's, another of Fishergate's 'lost' churches was also

identified. A scallop shell in one of the 250 medieval graves suggests the person had been on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella. In 1364, the church had a small hospital attached to it for the poor and infirm. It was demolished in 1622 and “timber and stuff” was re-used on St Antony’s Hospital in Peasholme Green.

5. Blue Bridge Lane, New Walk, Anglian Eoforwic & St Andrew’s Priory

In 1730, a tree-lined New Walk was laid out along the river Ouse through St George’s Field. The walk became popular and was extended in 1738, with a new blue-painted timber lift-bridge over the river Foss. It was replaced by a larger swing-bridge in 1794 when the Foss was canalised and the present hand-operated lift-bridge was installed in 1929. Until 1941, two Russian canons from Sebastopol ‘guarded’ the bridge, with an adjacent plaque recording the names of York men killed in the Crimean war.

Before the flood barrier was built in 1986, high water in the Ouse used to flow back up the Foss and inundate large areas of the city. Up to 30 tons of water per second can be pumped around the barrier when it is closed.

The brick walls below the Novotel were originally part of a large glassworks that operated from 1797. Barges and Humber Keels unloaded here bringing sand, coal and fuel oil to the factory until its closure in 1988.

Before the Novotel and houses were built, archaeologists found remains of St Andrew’s church, recorded in the Domesday Book as being owned by Hugh FitzBaldrick. In 1202 it was re-developed as a Gilbertine Priory and reconstructed and enlarged in the mid-14th century. (*sadly, the last section of the Priory wall was destroyed when the new apartments were built*).

Archaeologists also found thousands of items dating from 7th – 9th centuries on the Priory site, including kilns, metal slag, loom weights, pottery, jewellery and bone combs. Some pots and other items came from northern France, Holland and Germany. Historians now believe that during the Anglian period, between

the Romans and the Vikings, this area was probably part of 'Eoforwic', the city's important manufacturing and international trading centre. The first timber church was built here before the Norman Conquest. A group of 24 skeletons with weapon injuries were possibly from the battle of Fulford in 1066.

6. River Foss to Castle Mills Lock

Protected from the swift currents of the river Ouse, Brownie Dyke has long been an important wharf for the city and is still used by boat repairers and fishermen.

The river Foss was canalised in 1794, bringing 50 ton barges into the city and upstream for 12 miles to Sherriff Hutton. Although little used beyond York, barges brought sand, gravel, coal and cocoa to the industrial heart of the city for 200 years. The last regular traffic, delivering rolls of newsprint to the Evening Press, ended in the late 1990's.

Castle Mills and St George's Chapel were built here soon after the Normans dammed the river Foss. The chapel was partially demolished in 1571 and its stones used to rebuild Ouse Bridge. It was re-built in timber in 1576 and became the apartments and the Windmill Inn.

The former chapel, Windmill Inn and Castle Mills were demolished in 1856 when the lock and basin were enlarged to allow much bigger barges to reach Leetham's Mill in Walmgate.

For more history of the area, see elsewhere on our website.

See also Van Wilson's book: 'Beyond the Postern Gate:

A history of Fishergate and Fulford Road'

The 'Friends of York Walls' open Fishergate Tower between 11am and 4pm on most Bank Holidays, York Residents Weekend, Heritage Open Buildings Weekend and many other occasions. Website:- www.yorkwalls.org.uk

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